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On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers

Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995.

Reviewed by Emmett Early

What do Mother Goose and Madonna have in common? The answer is that they are both studied by Marina Warner in *From the Beast to the Blonde*. Upon opening the pages of this beautiful book, readers enter a sturdy castle built in the world of fantasy; and there Ms. Warner, as our queenly hostess, presides over a treasure-trove of facts, from the esoterica of medieval Christian antiquaries to the hagiography of saints, all pointing to the cultural origins of fairy tales. When, for instance, she commands attention to the text with wonderfully chosen illustrations, she establishes her thesis with unrivalled authority. She doesn't argue so much as convince, marshalling fact after fact, and showing that these are connected by themes that we sometimes forget until we come upon the force of one, like a surprising question mark at the end of a long sentence. She leaves us at the end of our tour with the weight of the facts piled like so many gifts in our arms. We don't mind that she's talked the whole time. Certainly, as she tells us from the beginning, she delights in words. And she is the first to point out that she is one of those women whom the tyrant would have banished for being too clever.

Earlier works by Marina Warner have established her trademark: they are also scholarly, amply illustrated (each one more richly than the last), exhaustively researched, and focused on the female imagery of our cultural legacy. Among her other works are *Joan of Arc: The Images of Female Heroism*; *Alone of All Her*



Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary; and Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form.

Although I am actually older than Ms. Warner, reading this new book by Marina Warner was for me like visiting my Aunt Emily for the holidays: by the time I was ready to leave the book it had me and the family of readers I imagined accompanying me all soporific with its major thesis dauntingly proved. We'd been happily entertained, dazzled, while the hostess's thesis was slipped like a Mickey Finn into our cups:

Prejudices against women, especially old women and their chatter, belong in the history of the fairy tale's changing status, for the pejorative image of the gossip was sweetened by the influences from the tradition of the Sibyls and the cult of Saint Anne, until the archetypal crone by the hearth could emerge as a mouthpiece of homespun wisdom. (p. xxiv)

Perhaps my own family associations belong to this social context of fairy tale telling itself, the tradition that Warner takes pains to document in this book. She shows the degree, for instance, to which mother-daughter fairy tales reflect social influences, especially when daughter and step-mother (both powerless) vie for the favor of the male power. She provides early Christian lives of the saints as sources for fairy tales, (or is it that fairy tales influenced the hagiography), saints like Saint Dymphna who was connected to the cycle of "Donkeyskin." She gives us the true sources of Mother Goose and the Queen of Sheba with her webbed foot, the cults of the Sibyl and of Saint Anne. She sees fairy tale as the discourse of the poor and disenfranchised, the neglected and the powerless.

Fairy tale offers a case where the very contempt for women opened an opportunity for them to exercise their wit and communicate their ideas: women's care for children, the prevailing disregard for both groups, and their presumed identity with the simple folk, the common people, handed them fairy tales as a different kind of nursery, where they might set their own seedlings and plant out their own flowers. (p. xxiii)

Her historical vision draws us into a room of mirrors where we look at the familiar tales, not as archetypal inner stories, but as tales of the forced marriages and wicked stepmothers that reflect the terrible history of upper middle class women's reality in former centuries, frightening mortality in childbirth, while the

more powerful men could marry ever younger women serially. She lets us examine “Bluebeard” from the angle of an innocent bride confronted with the perils of childbirth and the realization that she may soon join her predecessors in the “bloody chamber” simply by becoming pregnant.

The “Beast” and the “Blonde” of the title refer to the young women on the one hand who grew body hair to avoid marriage and to those on the other who sported golden locks as advertisements of their goodness. She combs through European history on the subject of hair, not excluding modern cinema and the Walt Disney studios, where particularly she observes a shift. Blonde hair was habitually used to represent good, but lately there has been a decided shift of caricature: the icon for goodness has become a more generic, mixed-race, Third World black. (Red hair is still relegated to magical or wicked—persons of no color.) One of the truly startling illustrations, in a book so rich with pictures, is her color plate number seven, which shows the black Queen of Sheba in green dress sporting golden hair.

Ms. Warner does not seem to have as good a grasp of what Jung means by archetypes. A passage in her introduction about archetypes, which attacks Jungian thought obliquely, vexes me.

An opposing theory—of archetypes—proposes that the structures of the imagination and the common experiences of human society inspire narrative solutions that resemble one another even when there can have been no contact or exchange: these are tales of animal metamorphosis in the legends of the Algonquin and other Native American peoples, which seem to echo—or vice versa—Asian and European fairy tale transformations. But there are problems of vagueness with these comparisons; when it comes to details of narratives and particular plot features (splinters of flax which cause a beauty to fall into an enchanted sleep; invisible attendants and dishes which appear of their own accord in the magic castle), a literary source usually lies at the story’s origin. (p. xxii)

But surely archetypes are refined, not compromised, by literary artifacts. A “splinter of flax” makes a good story and also brings out the archetype. I find that the manifestations of archetypes are usually couched, like flakes of gold, in the mundane, their numinosity gleaming through the layers of culture. For instance, in Walt Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*, the smooth cinematic reworking of the material strikes us as the very essence of the



archetype, just as a smooth stone that washes up on the beach is, for the connoisseur, the very essence of stone. In some such way the ongoing enculturation of the archetypal products operates as a smoothing refinement. Cinema is just another step in the process begun by the troubadours and literati of King Louis's Court who brought the anima into cultural relief. Ms. Warner herself observes that our pop star Madonna continues the tradition of Mother Goose, floating as she does in the same archetypal stream that carries Mae West, Maid Marion, and Aphrodite.

Warner acknowledges the significance of Cocteau's 1949 movie version of "Beauty and the Beast," *La Belle et la Bête*. She notes the disappointment we feel when Beast's enchantment is broken and the interesting, elegant, passionate Beast turns into an "ordinary" human prince. (Children continue to feel let down by this scene in the recent Disney version). In Cocteau's film, when the transformation takes place, the spell of the film itself is broken: its archetypal aura slips away, and the drama ceases to enchant us. Through stories such as "Beauty and the Beast," Warner casts an imaginal light on the history, in very recent centuries, of forced marriages and the girl's obedience to father's rule. "Donkeyskin," for instance, is a cycle of stories about the dilemma of father-daughter incest and the fate of the runaway girl. Warner's brilliant amplification of this cycle recovers the cult of St. Dymphna, "a seventh-century princess, the daughter of a king of Brittany . . . and of a beautiful mother who inevitably dies." (p. 334) As recorded hagiographically in the thirteenth century, St. Dymphna, as a girl, dedicated herself to God. But when the future saint's mother, on her death bed, made her father swear to marry a woman no less beautiful than herself, he was placed in a bind where he could only choose his own daughter. Ms. Warner tells the next part of the story: "Dymphna then consults her confessor, Gerebernus, who advises flight. He is a saintly and very old man—in case there should be any misunderstanding of an ulterior motive." (p. 336) Saint Dymphna is aided in her flight by the court fool and his wife. Together they flee, dressed as traveling minstrels (*jongleurs* who sported caps of asses' ears), and they hide themselves in a forest of a foreign land. Her father's agents find her there, and her father beheads her. Referring to the historical legend of the bride in "Bluebeard" as well as the incest-fleeing daughter in

"Donkeyskin," Ms. Warner writes, "in the related life of Dymrna, the only wedding takes place after torture and martyrdom with the Son of Heaven as bridegroom." (p. 337)

Warner's historical research traces the *Vita* of Saint Dymrna as it weaves in and out of the European culture in the middle ages, from colloquial to Latin to oral tradition, and again to the literary in tales by Perrault and the Brothers Grimm. She observes that the fool's interesting role as narrator points to the communications media of the time, the traveling *jongleur*. Warner then evocatively concludes: "When Dymrna chooses his occupation [fool] for her escape, she is in effect concealing herself in a riddle, the image of an artist skilled in just such word puzzles." (p. 338)

Everything is here but a sense of the way the archetype lives in just such cultural contexts. As I understand Jung, archetypes are built into the structure of the psyche, but psyche needs culture to evoke its pattern. I imagine archetypes exist because the brains in humans are essentially the same. Yet as Clifford Geertz has argued, what humans fill their brains with in the course of a lifetime, to survive and cope, itself affects neural structure, making its ultimate pattern more difficult to know. And, as in trying to see stars from the city, one can't as easily see archetypes in the presence of the cultural lights. One can, however, vividly observe the chaotic patterns they continue to generate in various manifestations of culture, which gives an eerie, if chaotic persistence, to the many parallels Jung was among the first to emphasize. Manifestations of archetypes, or themes, are as likely to appear in the productions of culture, and radio, TV, and cinema, as in a learned Jungian essay because these media are hosts to the epics created by the collective psyche.

Though eschewing archetypal theory itself, Marina Warner uses a historical method that is similar to Jung's, if more rigorous, interweaving cultures with stories and linking up to our electronic age a consummate historian's integrity. What she does not do (perhaps she cannot, as a cultural historian) is look within the individual psyche to find the psychological dynamic that also resides in the fairy tale. It would have been a great addition to an already wonderful book to discuss the individual who, in the fairy tale of "Snow White," keeps opening the door to the witch. Or the one, in "Hansel and Gretel," who is attracted to the poisoning nurturance of the witch's gingerbread house. She does help us feel the suffering of the girl in the "Donkeyskin" tales



who abandons herself to ignominy. But, for the most part individual psychology is the least developed aspect of the book. I cannot fault her for this after she has given us so much, and perhaps, after von Franz and Bettelheim, she thought this way of approach had been covered by specialists. Warner does offer suggestive passages about the way the heritage of fairy tales has inspired the contemporary creations of individual artists, including film makers. I wish that she had gone more deeply into this theme. I would particularly have liked her to expand on her discussion of “self-immolatory heroism.” She writes, referring to the tradition of particularly onerous tasks given to female heroes, such as weaving nettles: “Women’s capacity for love and action tragically exceeded the permitted boundaries of their lives—this self-immolatory heroism was one of the few chivalrous enterprises open to them.” (p. 393) “Self-immolatory heroism,” is a theme in modern cinema ripe for scholarly exploration: movies of traumatized women destroying themselves in cars, like Thelma and Louise driving into the canyon, pursued by a phalanx of patriarchal police cars; Jodi Foster in *The Accused*, crashing her car into the truck of her tormentor and smashing herself in the process, then having to draw upon the heroism of Joan of Arc to testify in court.

There was of course another genre of heroism, besides the self-immolatory, open to women artists before cinema, that Jungian interpreters have noted. This is the creative projection of the animus in the construction of imaginary men, the animus action heroes, such as Mary Shelley’s Hephæstian monster in *Frankenstein*, or that hermetic master of disguise, Barroness Orczy’s *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. Frankenstein’s monster, as Theodore Roszak has observed, has become a modern myth of the misuse of science and technology, and, I would add, the precursor of all the other cinematic heroes of social alienation, the paranoid observers, epitomized in Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (played by Robert De Niro who went on to play Frankenstein’s monster in the recent Branagh remake of Shelley’s novel). *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, no less robust a source of spin-off images, has been credited with originating a host of modern popular super heroes, including The Lone Ranger, Zorro, Batman, with the female source long forgotten.

In my family, on one of those Christmas visits, we used to sit down with Aunt Emily and go through family picture albums



after dinner and dishes. Only Emily, with her salty authority, could make the associations that let us understand who was connected with who, and add colorful anecdotes to prove her point. After finishing this commanding book, I felt as if I'd found a younger, but more formidable English relation, one who could treat me to a queenly tour of our common European roots. I imagine even those who don't have European roots would come away from this generous beginning to that project with a sense of having sampled more than they can process, yet feeling like they'd like to know even more about the enigmatic vitality of the high European culture's tradition—maybe just to experience one more adventure worth savoring happily every after.